

\sec\McNamara
April 30, 1995
(30th anniversary of the fall of Saigon)

"Why didn't you speak out?" Larry King asks.

"There is such a thing as loyalty. There is patriotism."

There is such a thing as a crime of silence. And careerism. And cowardice. And a totally warped sense of loyalty and patriotism for an American official to have, more suitable to a German or Japanese official in World War II. Loyalty to a boss or a President as if he were a Fuhrer or an Emperor. Loyalty to a promise of secrecy above loyalty to the Constitution, laws, US troops, countrymen, truth or common morality (beyond the code of the bureaucracy or the Mafia).

McNamara shares with nearly all of his colleagues these character flaws and moral shortcomings--beyond the ignorance and misunderstandings and good intentions on which he blames their "mistaken" decisions--along with almost total ignorance and neglect of the principles of the Constitution, Bill of Rights and Declaration of Independence and the role of the Congress, public, and press in the making of foreign policy. To have challenged the President's policy publicly--to tell the truth to Congress, say--would have been "unconstitutional," he believes.

I grew up in World War II watching movies in which the stereotypical German officer would say, "I was only obeying orders." It is chilling, fifty years later, to hear an American cabinet officer use the same excuse.

I think he is sincere in this. I don't think he is hiding a sense of guilt, conscious or even unconscious. I think he has constructed a defense that successfully, in his mind, shields him from guilt: though he is sorry that, along with everyone he knew (and David Halberstam), he was mistaken in his premises and his beliefs and regrets the deaths that followed (unavoidably) from these human and almost-universally shared errors. (I don't think he mentions anyone, other than Ball, who did not share them--or expressed contrary opinions to the President, like Clark Clifford in the spring of 1965!)

He refuses to acknowledge that he could have ended the war anytime after he realized that the gamble was not working (late 1965 or 1966) and that his failure to do so or to speak out makes him directly and culpably responsible for the deaths of nearly thirty thousand Americans and indirectly responsible, after he left office, for the deaths of almost thirty thousand more.

He seems to feel no sense of personal responsibility at all. (His admissions of personal error--"to probe more deeply," "to be

more skeptical" at various points--are not only inadequate but quite misleading.) He seems not at all to have arrived at the enlightenment revealed in the memoirs of Albert Speer, perhaps reflecting the lack of comparable years of reflection in a prison cell after a public trial. (To be fair, McNamara has brought on himself something very like a public trial after all these years; perhaps reflection on the questions asked in talk shows and columns and the denunciations might lead to a fuller and more reflective account sometime in the future.)

McNamara keeps saying his colleagues were the best and the brightest. They weren't. (I include myself). They lacked wisdom, foresight and scruples, and many people in the society, and many people outside the Executive branch had better judgment. But unfortunately, it is true that they were about as good as any in the Administrations that have come after them, or that we are likely to see. That is not good enough: which is why the Constitution gives a role in foreign policy to the Congress, the press and the courts and why this role must be renewed and strengthened.

Actually, the best and the brightest who got us into Vietnam and kept us there were no better or brighter, or more arrogant or complacent and dangerously misguided, than Dr. John Deutch and Dr. Ashton Carter in the Pentagon, Dr. Lynn Davis in State, Dr. Anthony Lake and Dr. (?) Robert Bell in the White House, among the officials today who are promoting a blind, shortsighted and possibly disastrous US nuclear policy that will encourage proliferation and nuclear terrorism. The costs of their errors--and here McNamara is wise and prescient--will be measured not so much in US troops deaths abroad (though that is possible, in regional conflicts that go nuclear) but in Hiroshima-scale nuclear explosions in American cities and elsewhere.

McNamara does show wisdom in drawing the lesson in his Appendix that the existence of nuclear weapons, given the inescapable errors and miscalculations of policymakers in every country, can lead to unprecedented and irreversible catastrophe; and that therefore we must seek to abolish nuclear weapons.

--costs of unquestioning obedience to a CINC; secrecy; faith in bombing; arrogant underestimation of force of others' nationalism;

--possibility of disobedience, of truth-telling; and power of it. Obligations of citizenship in a democracy; requirements of maintaining a democracy. Role of Congress and press.

--US policy as terrorist (Rolling Thunder: more apt, even, than Patricia's "torture.") Relation to nuclear policy; analogy; and lesson for costs.

--McNamara's lies and omissions

--McNamara's wise lesson about nuclear abolition.

--his rare revelations: about nuclear threats; Rusk's willingness to go to general war (should have been committed; or removed from office at least, sent to a rest).

--Odd fact about current debate: although the antiwar movement is often mentioned, either as vindicated by McNamara's revelations or as the precursor of the Oklahoma terrorism (or having led, regrettably, first to excesses and then to excessive restraints on the FBI) there is never a mention (with the exception of Robert Scheer--who, I think, lumps me with Jane Fonda and Daniel Berrigan as antiwar activists) of the one man who did what Robert McNamara is denounced for not doing, and actually revealed the same documents in 1969 and 1971 that McNamara is denounced for revealing 29 years too late. And who was put on trial for it. No one ever asks him such questions as: Why didn't you do what Daniel Ellsberg did? Or, what do you think of him now? Or, why did you denounce him for revealing this information earlier? Or comments: Ellsberg was right, both in what he said (McNamara is fully agreeing with and substantiating that now) and what he did (else why is McNamara justified in putting out these secrets--some of them, surely, still regarded in the government as classified!--now?)